

# Weimar Cinema – foreshadowing the rise of Hitler?



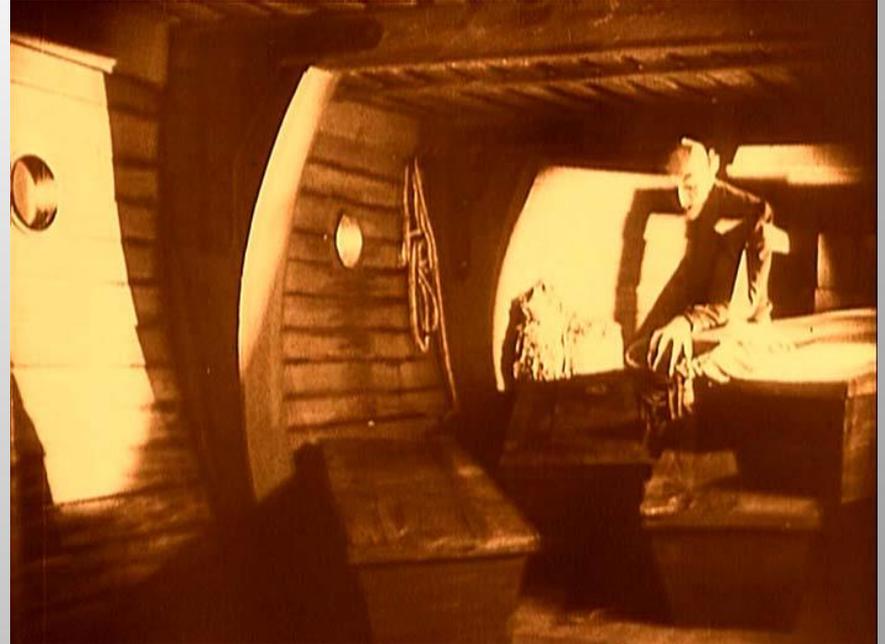
Remember the context of the films from 1920s Germany?

- Post war deprivation and depression
- Film as a young art following the trends of the more established arts
- Dented national pride
- The influenza epidemic of 1919
- Loss of faith in authority
- Fear of authority as manipulative &/or insane
- Harking back to old Germanic legends
- The growing interest in psychoanalysis
- The wish to create a uniquely German cinema
- Increased industrialisation and its effects on humanity

Most controversially:

- Growing fear of disturbance within the community from 'outsiders' – Roma, Eastern European, Jewish (political/racial aspects)

The fear of the 'outsider' who arrives into and disrupts the happy German society, could reflect some German thinking at the time – something we can interpret as anti-semitic.



# The shift from idyllic 19<sup>th</sup> Century German life to horror



A vocal minority through the right wing press spread the myth of the 'stab in the back' theory, blaming the loss of the war on the Jewish community.

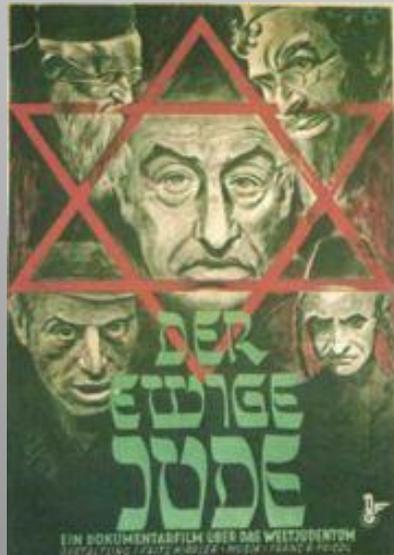


When the Nazis came to power in 1933 they made the legend part of their official history of the 1920s, portraying the Weimar Republic as the work of the "November criminals" who used the stab in the back to seize power while betraying the nation.

The Nazi propaganda depicted Weimar as "a morass of corruption, degeneracy, national humiliation, ruthless persecution of the honest 'national opposition'—fourteen years of rule by Jews, Marxists, and 'cultural Bolsheviks', who had at last been swept away by the National Socialist movement under [Adolf Hitler](#) and the victory of the 'national revolution' of 1933".



There is some comparison between the depictions of some of the villainous characters and stereotypes of Jews used in Nazi propaganda of the later 1920s and 30s



The Nibelungen (1924)





Writing in the late 1940s, the film critic Siegfried Kracauer looked back at the expressionist films from the perspective of post-Nazi Germany. He saw the films from a sociological perspective – equating the themes and images in the films as a reflection of the growing popularity of fascism in Germany in the 1920s.

# Caligari as a 'premonition' of Hitler

**“Whether intentionally or not, *Caligari* exposes the soul wavering between tyranny and chaos and facing a desperate situation: any escape from tyranny seems to throw it into a state of utter confusion.”**



# Kracauer did not see Hitler as a direct influence on the films

Rather, he saw that the films reflect popular German thinking at the time.

Thinking that Hitler exploited and shaped into a Nazi consciousness.



# Hitler Chronology

- [1919](#)
- **Hitler a speaker for the minority German Workers Party**
- [1922](#)
- **Hitler in and out of prison, though now leader of his party**
- [1927](#)
- **Publishes Mein Kampf. The Nazi Party becoming more popular though not in power**
- [1933](#)
- **Becomes Chancellor of Germany – end of Weimar period.**

# The Cabinet of Dr Caligari

- Arguments supporting Kracauer's thesis:
- Mayer & Janowitz' anti-authoritarian screenplay is 'toned down', suggesting a 'desire for strong leadership'
- The asylum director's (Caligari's?) authority is safe at the end
- The antagonist (Francis) who doubts authority is revealed as mad
- The monstrous figure of Caligari bears a resemblance to the Jewish stereotypes that formed later Nazi propaganda
- The film seems to represent nationalist fears about 'outsiders' and longing for stability.



# Siegfried Kracauer:

- “Caligari is a very specific premonition in the sense that he uses hypnotic power to force his will upon his tool – a technique foreshadowing, in context and purpose, that manipulation of the soul which Hitler was the first to practice on a gigantic scale”

– From Caligari to Hitler

# Against Kracauer's argument

- The narrative frame in Caligari was changed for artistic/commercial reasons not ideological ones
- Kracauer omits the Jewishness and/or left wing views of many in the film industry in the 1920s
- The argument that Caligari is outsider AND authority is contradictory
- The focus on totalitarianism neglects other issues – e.g. feminist readings
- The films were often transnational in funding, creation, etc – for example, UFA studios was in partnership with Paramount

# Thomas Elsaesser

- **Writing in the 1990s, Thomas Elsaesser** analyses how the upper and middle classes in Germany turned to Nazism due to the fear of loss of social status.
- But, he considers the *context of Kracauer's writing* – much immediate post-Nazi studies of Weimar cinema look for either fascist or progressive tendencies : a binary point of view.

Kracauer called Nosferatu, “one of a procession of tyrants”

1: Discuss evidence from the film that supports a Kracauer style reading



2: Argue against

# Anti-semitism?

## Arguments against

- Approximately two thousand Jewish and Leftist members of the German film industry went into exile in 1933, including Directors Fritz Lang, Robert Weine and actors Conrad Veidt and Peter Lorre
- F.W. Murnau deliberately cut out all the anti-Jewish references from the source novel for his film 'The Arch-Duke's Finances. He also left for America at the end of the 1920s